

FAITHFULNESS TO TRADITION AND PEACEMAKING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Rabbi David Rosen

I appreciate this opportunity to look at the challenges and some of the initiatives concerning Religion and Peacemaking in the Middle East, precisely out of a recognition that the subject we have sought to address here in Riga, relating to the local context, is a universal theme but has particular relevance in the Middle East; namely, the challenge of preserving one's own tradition and identity, while at the same time seeking to overcome the problems and the challenges that have bedevilled relationships between communities. In other words the realization of the vision of the Biblical Prophets, to be able to preserve one's particularity while at the same time affirming a universality. This of course is the enormous challenge that has been alluded to in many of the presentations that we have heard, starting with that of the State President on the opening evening. The problem is not only that such a social vision is not necessarily realised or brought about by religious institutions, but also that often religious institutions seem to be more of an obstacle – a problem, than a solution. Furthermore we are conscious of the fact that all too often religion has been and is a tool for the exacerbation of hostility and conflict between communities, instead of overcoming it.

As has already been mentioned during our conference - part and parcel of this problem is the inextricable relationship between religion and identity. Because religion seeks to give meaning to whom we are, it is inextricably bound up with all the components of human identity, whether as an individuals, or members of families, communities, nations and the human family as a whole. All these components are the building blocks of our psycho-spiritual health. Because Religion is inextricably bound up with them, where these elements are used constructively, then religion tends to be an expression of such. However unfortunately, where they are used destructively, then religion itself often tends to be not only part of the

problem but even a source of exacerbation. There are those who think, as indeed did John Lennon in his song "Imagine", that somehow eliminating these different components of identities can somehow be a solution to the problem. Of course, we know especially from the experiences of modern society that the reverse is the case. Elimination of the components that form individual specific identities, just render the individual more vulnerable to negative exploitation. You will recall works such as the book "Future Shock" written by Alvin Toffler, which referred to the problem of deracination of so many young people today who, uprooted from one context to another, lose their sense of understanding of whom they are; and of the modern proliferation of cults, of drug abuse and violence, as expressing the search for meaning and identity on the part of those who are divested of such.

The challenge of course is how to be able to ensure that where religion is especially linked up with identity as it is, and where it seeks to nurture that identity as it does; it should nurture it in a way that is expansive and not insular; in a way that affirms the wider circles of human society, rather than shutting people off from the broader environment. Religion has the capacity to do both! Because religion is inextricably bound up with identity, it tells me both who I am, and it also tells me who I am not. Telling me who I am not and what distinguishes me is not necessarily bad, if it is an expression and affirmation of self and relates accordingly with respect for the other. But all too often that telling me who I am not is an insular and isolationist expression of a sense of my vulnerability and even of being under siege. The image we might use here is one of a spiral. These different components of identity I have mentioned before, are circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, then they can open up and affirm the broader context; families respecting other families; communities respecting other communities; nations respecting other nations; and religion affirming the commonality within the family of nations or humankind. However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader

context, they isolate themselves, cut themselves off from one another and generally compound the sense of alienation. In the Middle East this phenomenon is especially intense. Everybody in our part of the world feels vulnerable and threatened; it is just that different groups see themselves and others in different paradigms! Therefore it is very difficult within that context to be able to open to the other and to be able to affirm our common humanity in the recognition and the importance of the fact not only that every human being is created in the image of the Divine, but that our religions – all our religions – affirm the value of peace as an ideal for human society and see violence and war as being undesirable – perhaps a necessity in cases, but certainly not as an ideal.

However where people feel threatened and vulnerable, it is very difficult to affirm that. Moreover where religion does not provide a prophetic challenge to political authority, but is both caught up as part of the political reality and even subordinate and subject to political authority; institutional religion tends to be more part of the problem than part of the solution. The role of the prophetic challenge to religious identities, to be faithful to their tradition while respecting the other – affirming the other and seeking the ideal of reconciliation and peace – has tended in our part of the world to be the voice of the non-establishment religious visionary and activist. It has more often than not been found in the work of interfaith activities or those denominational traditions that have not been part of establishment power, that have affirmed these fundamental Jewish values within our Tradition. Similarly the participants from the Muslim communities in our region have generally been individuals who have not represented that establishment's institutions, the Muftis, the Shaaria Courts – positions appointed by the political authorities.

Christianity has perhaps been a more constructive voice within this context, but there is the rub, for Christianity in the Middle East is characterized precisely by the fact that it is not linked to any political power base. It is in fact the distance from the seats of power that has often

facilitated such challenge to power structures. But institutional religion in our part of the world is generally so inextricably bound up with the power structures – with the heads of the respective communities appointed by the political authorities – that it is very rare indeed for a truly prophetic voice challenging political authority and affirming our responsibility to the other, to come out from the institutional religious leadership of either the Jewish or Muslim communities. And even within the local Christian communities there is a tendency to similarly be bound up by the exigencies of the political realities that impose very significant restrictions and pressures upon the role of leadership within that particular context.

All this is by way of explanation of the fact that “mirabile dictu” “wondrous to relate”, until only a few months ago the religious leaders of the establishment in the Holy Land had never ever come together. Moreover the general tendency of their respective masters, namely the political authorities, was to keep them far away from anything that had any bearing on the political direction of the region as a whole. I recall on a visit in Egypt where I was part of a group that was received by President Mubarak, at a time when the peace process was still moving ahead albeit at a painfully slow pace, that one of our company suggested that it would be important to bring religious leadership together and that he might play a role in helping that. “Religious leaders,” he said “you should keep far away from them. That is a very dangerous idea.” And similarly, I believe it was a significant factor in the failure of the Middle East Peace Process, that on the lawn of the White House when the famous handshake took place, one saw no visible personality representing religious leadership either of the Jewish community or of the Muslim community in the Holy Land expressing a desire to find a way out of the regional conflicts. The message was clear: religion is something to be kept out of the process; and in fact it compounded a sense of alienation on the part of the most fervently religious elements within both communities who did their best to bring it down (not that I am suggesting any equivalence here!). I think there is now the beginnings of a recognition, that not only is religion as it

has been described “the missing art of statecraft”, but that in fact, if one does not bring in religious institutions that reflect the most profound identities of the people in our part of the world; if you don’t bring them in, in a constructive way to support positive political processes, inevitably you are playing into the hands of those hostile to them. The real way to overcome the extremists is to strengthen the hands of the moderates. The real way to marginalize the abuse of religion is to demonstrate its constructive use to enable the embrace of the other while respecting the differences that make us who we are. And so, in fact, it was not by any virtue of our religious establishments themselves that an historic event took place in January – an historic event, which I believe has great importance for the future involvement of religion as a constructive force to help the resolution of our conflict in the years ahead. It came about as I say not by any inherent virtue, but probably in the context of the impact of the tragedy of September 11 and the so-called war on terrorism in response. Political leadership then had a great need to show its support for an initiative in which religion would be playing a constructive role and in which they could be seen to be against the violent abuse of religion and the terrible manifestations of violence in the name of religion that we have witnessed in recent times.

It was however, the initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury who had been visiting the Holy Land and had met with leaders of different communities who had urged him to help out, that brought about this event. Providentially Dr. Carey had an institutional relationship with Al Azhar, the fountainhead of Islamic learning in the Arab world, indeed in the Muslim world at large. It was crucial that there be a significant Arab Muslim host, because in our context, precisely for the reasons that I have explained, it would have been very difficult indeed to have brought the local religious leaders together. While the Chief Rabbis of Israel do not represent all religious Jews in Israel, let alone in the world; nevertheless their standing would be recognized among Jewry, especially if they were to play a role in religious reconciliation. Similarly, while the Patriarchs of

Jerusalem do not represent the whole of Christendom, their role as representatives of Christianity in an effort to promote reconciliation in the Middle East would certainly be affirmed by the Christian world. But in the Islamic context, the role of the religious establishment within the Palestinian society, does not guarantee it the standing throughout the whole of the Muslim world that would ensure that its voice would be heard and respected accordingly. Thus the need to have the major institution of Islamic learning support this process was of critical importance. As I say, it was possible because President Mubarak like other political leaders, had an interest in being seen to be on the side of constructive religious resolution of conflict rather than to be avoiding it. And not only President Mubarak, but of course Prime Minister Sharon, and Chairman Arafat also had an interest in such. The amazing thing was that they all lent their support to this initiative despite the violence that was going on at the time, to bring together religious leaders in Alexandria. Mention should be made of the WCRP which provided resources to enable the event to take place. A key person in facilitating the meeting was Canon Andrew White of Coventry Cathedral – a former Chairman of our YLC – who served (and continues to serve) as the Archbishop of Canterbury’s emissary in this endeavour. This was indeed an historic event, precisely for the reasons I have mentioned, as never before had the heads of the different three faith communities in the Holy Land ever come together. And while the Mufti of Jerusalem was not there, we had four of the leading Sheikhs from the establishment structure of the Palestinian authority including the head of the Shaaria Courts, their Supreme Islamic Court; and we had five Israeli rabbis, including the Sephardic Chief Rabbi; all Patriarchs were represented, the Latin Patriarch in person; and we produced a remarkable document which in the end was a little bit of a camel – being put together by a committee, with various degrees of brinkmanship going on both before and in Alexandria, each delegation being in contact with their respective political leadership on the details of the text. Eventually we were able to present a document which while not earth shattering, in the context of the Middle East conflict, it is extremely

significant. It condemned the violent abuse of religion, of suicidal homicides, of actions that are oppressive and destructive of human life and dignity; it called for a cessation of all violence and withdrawal of forces from the territories under the Palestinian authority in consequence of there being an end to acts of terrorism; it called for the parties to return to the negotiating table and to recognize the importance of religion as a force of reconciliation; it called for respect of the rights of both peoples; the sanctity of holy sites, ensuring access to them and freedom of worship. Especially in face of the ongoing violence this was a document of historic significance.

But the real meaning and value, I think, will only be evident in the months and years ahead. While the signatories to the Declaration established themselves as a committee for consultation, cooperation and coordination between the religious communities locally, the lasting value of the process will depend upon bringing on board the religious leadership in the broader Islamic-Arab world if not beyond. In fact there was to be a follow-up taking place in Amman at this time which has been postponed, but hopefully will happen, if not in Amman then in Rabat. The goal must be to involve all the key Arab players that have a stake in the question of Jerusalem and the holy sites and the Holy Land at large. Egypt sees itself as leader of the Arab world and Al Azhar is as I have indicated the primary institute of Muslim learning. The Palestinians and the Jordanians both see themselves as the local players in relation to the Muslim holy sites and the future of the Holy Land; the Saudis see themselves as the guardians of all the Muslim holy places; and Morocco's King is chairman of the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of Islamic Countries. Accordingly there is the need to bring them all in on the process and as I have indicated initiatives are taking place precisely in order to do so.

But in a final analysis this meeting in Alexandria serves as an important testimony – as an indication to political leadership that it must take religion seriously as a constructive part and parcel of a process of

reconciliation, precisely in order to affirm that it is only through being respectful of our own traditions and toward those of others, that we will be able to create a climate in which peace can actually succeed and flourish.

May I therefore conclude with the hope that your prayers will be with this initiative as well as for the various interfaith activities on different levels that take place in the Middle East. All these levels have their own significance and their own importance; that which takes place purely on the level of officialdom and establishments is itself not good enough if it is not supported by grass-roots work. But it sends a very important message: it serves as testimony; it presents the vision in which religion is not seen as just part of the problem; but seen to be part of the solution – may it become such.